

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, November 4, 2022

Luke 1:39-45

Our text this day is from the Gospel of Luke. We'll read from the first chapter in just a moment, but just a reminder that we continue to move through a worship series we've entitled Minor Figures Major Faith. And so we are trying to learn from the underappreciated characters of the Christmas story. Here at Idlewild we believe that voices that are ignored in the world are to be paid attention to because it is in those voices that we might hear the word of God to us, and so we're doing that throughout the season of Advent, and our figure this day is Elizabeth. We got a taste last week because Zechariah was our figure, and so if you remember Zechariah goes to share incense in the Holy of Holies within the Temple of God and is told that he and Elizabeth, they will have a child, even in their old age. So this is later—a little bit later in the Gospel of Luke, beginning in the 39th verse and going through the 45th verse.

So let us listen together for God's word to each of us and to the world.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So I was in West Hollywood at the Hollywood Improv Theater. I was there with about 25 people I'd never met before. I was there to spend two days with someone, a leader and an author that I admire. His name is Rob Bell. He does these small conferences every once in a while. This one was about creativity. It was actually—people were supposed to bring from all across the country and the world, really, something that they were stuck on, a project that they were working on, or something they were trying to imagine, and they couldn't get past a certain point. So it started with Rob on a stool on the stage of the Hollywood Improv; and he just said, "Who goes first?" And one after another for the next two days people would come up and tell us where they were stuck, and we would move with them through that stuckness to see the thing that God was trying to author. In the middle of our time together, he introduced a friend. It was just after lunch on the second day. Her name was Kristin Hanggi. You might know her from directing the Broadway production of *Rock of Ages*. She came to talk to us about what it meant to be a director—a creative. She has a master's in storytelling, which not many people can claim, so she told us

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stories; and in the midst of her telling a story, she was actually trying to tell us how stories are constructed. So she said, “Raise your hand if you are familiar with the hero's journey.”

(At this, members of the Idlewild congregation raise their hands, and Rev. Powers says, “You can do that too. Are you familiar with the hero's journey? Yeah, and I kind of love it, like that, yeah.”)

So Joseph Campbell has this archetype for what the story can look like—the heroic story. In that room that day—it was full of a bunch of creatives and a whole bunch of authors—and so everyone's hand shot up; and I kind of meekly said, “Yeah, I think I know what it is.”

And then she asked, “Are you familiar with the heroine’s journey? Raise your hand.” And no one raised their hand. (We’ve got one up here.) No one raised their hand in that group. In fact, everybody kind of looked at each other confused. She went on to unpack this movement of the heroine. This isn't necessarily a male-female journey. Right? The idea is that the heroine's journey is the journey of the feminine. The hero's journey is the journey of the masculine. All of us have within us masculine and feminine energies, this inner life and the outer life; and so she compared for us, compared and contrasted this hero's journey and the heroine's journey, this outward journey and this inward journey. This heroine's journey, she would say, was created by Maureen Murdoch, and it provides for us a template—not *the singular* template but *a* template—for what the internal journey looks like within the human being.

I tell you about that to tell you this—

That when Mary makes her way to see Elizabeth, it's my contention that she has just begun her journey. If we are to take literally the idea of the heroine's journey as that which is being created within us, then we ought to know that just before verse 39, Mary has been told that she will bear a child into the world; and the first thing that she does on this journey is go and see Elizabeth.

When she makes her way to Zechariah's house and is greeted there with Elizabeth's presence, she speaks aloud a word of greeting; and something happens, not within her but within Elizabeth. Calvin calls John leaping in Elizabeth's womb the eschatological leap.

And she brings her inside, and she calls her blessed; in fact, “Blessed are you among women; blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Mary hasn't told anybody, but Elizabeth knows. Elizabeth's a little farther along on her journey of pregnancy, but she's also *much* farther along in her journey of life. These are not two women at similar stages in life navigating pregnancy. Scripture tells us that the miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy actually relates to her age. She is *much* older. She has traveled *many* more roads in one particular type of journey.

“Why has this happened to me,” she says, “that the mother of my Lord comes to me? As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt.” And this is the spirit talking through Elizabeth, so the spirit lets us know this wasn't just a kick. This was joy moving within Elizabeth.

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Here's what I think—

That when you have Elizabeth and Mary in this scene, you have Mary at the beginning of her heroine's journey, growing something within her, one that we know with the wisdom of hindsight now. We know how the story ends, or we think we know how it ends. She is just the beginning. And Elizabeth does many wonderful things for her. First Elizabeth acknowledges Mary's inward journey. She, at the very beginning, validates Mary's story. The spirit does this within her. Church, you need to never underestimate how significant it is when we have the voice of someone validating our story, what we have experienced, not debating it with us but letting us know that it is true and real.

Elizabeth is a few months away from being a mother, but she is mothering Mary right here.

Mary's mother is nowhere to be found, but Elizabeth is there. On their heroine's journey, just like on the hero's journey, the protagonist must meet at some point an elder. They must meet someone who's farther along in the journey than they are, that could teach them and encourage them.

And Elizabeth is that to Mary. Elizabeth is the encourager that Mary needs actually to feel the excitement and the possibility of this pregnancy.

Right after verse 46, Mary will break into song. That's part of our lectionary you're perhaps familiar with—Mary's song. It's one of joy. I want you to think about this. I want you to imagine Mary holding in this truth that is secret to her, traveling, and then having the voice of one on a very similar journey to her validating her story, and then giving her permission to celebrate, so that Mary's response is song; it's joy put to words.

So what does Elizabeth teach us about welcoming the Christ, this minor figure, one that isn't a part of our lectionary. What does she teach us? Here's what I imagine, beloved. This morning you might feel like Mary, holding a secret, something within you. Perhaps it is creative; perhaps it has to do with your work, something you've been waiting to do; perhaps it has to do with your family, a place you've been planning to go; perhaps it has to do with your partner, something you need to share. Perhaps God has planted something within you, and you've just begun the journey of figuring out what it looks like, what it means. Perhaps this morning you are married, and if you are married this morning, then Elizabeth teaches us to encourage each other.

A friend of mine is a preacher now, but for a long time she was a youth director with no eyes on going to seminary and being a preacher. But she tells the story of sitting in a pew at the First Presbyterian Church in Athens, Georgia, and she tells the story of the spirit of God falling on her during the sermon and telling her clearly, “You will preach the gospel.”

She left that service in tears but couldn't tell her husband why she was in tears, went through the rest of that Sunday afternoon weepy and couldn't tell him why. It was a week later sitting around

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the dinner table when she said, “I have to tell you something. The spirit of God told me I'm supposed to preach the gospel. This is going to turn everything in our lives upside down. I need to go to seminary. I need to start in ministry.”

And my friend would say—I think she's a little harsh on him—but that her husband doesn't always have the best word of response; he's not known to be one that has that wise word to share; but he looked across the dinner table, and he said, “Honey, I think you'd be really wonderful at that, We'll do whatever we need to do.”

Perhaps you need to be encouraged today, that that which has been planted within you is being nurtured by the very spirit of God, that you are not alone on your journey, that there are other people seated around you in the pew that have something different planted within them, but it's just as real and just as valid and is coming to fruition in God's timing. Bonhoeffer tells us that we have to wait in this season, and waiting is forgotten in an impatient age. He tells us that we want to break open ripe fruit when it's hardly finished being planted.

But it turns out that the greatest, most profound, most tender things in the world, for those we must wait. So be encouraged when you're waiting this day if you feel like Mary.

Or maybe you are Elizabeth, maybe you are to be a minor figure in the life of another this day. Maybe you have someone who is close to you who is carrying with them something that they cannot carry alone. And it might just so happen that the spirit of God might let you share space together and that you might have to be midwife to their dream.

Or perhaps on a broader scale, we might understand ourselves as a church as Elizabeth, and we might understand that we are being asked to be elders for a world that wants to be birthed, that we are to be the ones to walk alongside the hurting and the broken and the outcast and the downtrodden, and that we are to be the ones that walk with them, not because we know their journey better than they do, but because we know the journey is hard, and they will need a companion.

In this season of Advent, we are imagining together what it is that these minor figures have to teach us about welcoming the Christ. My hope for you this day is that in the gospel you hear an encouraging word for the thing that you carry, that you feel inspiration to be the midwife, to be the encourager, to be the one that is the elder helping to birth the world unknown. Know this though, beloved, wherever you find yourself, there the spirit of God is, leaping for joy at what God is doing.

“In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.